

# *The Strike at River Rouge: 1941*

In 1941, tens of thousands of auto workers at the Ford River Rouge complex in Dearborn, Michigan, overcame many obstacles to build a union from the bottom up and to win a strike that had a strong potential to turn into a "race riot."



*Aerial shot of Ford River Rouge Plant, which was more than 1.5 miles long and included over 93 buildings*

This is a history filled with drama, heroism, and excitement, a political milestone for U.S. workers, in which class consciousness overcame racism.

Henry Ford was a boss who knew how to alternate the carrot and the stick. He introduced a \$5 a day minimum wage in 1914, before others in auto and put out countless publications filled with paternalistic advice.

On the other hand, starting in 1919, he set up the Ford Service, the largest private police force in the world --around 3000 gangsters, ex-convicts, prizefighters, wrestlers, and others. They didn't wear uniforms or LD.s and some worked in the plants. They engaged in spying, intimidation, and violence against Ford workers interested in unionization or radical ideas. Between 1937 and 1941, some 4000 workers were fired from Ford plants.

Dearborn, where the River Rouge complex was located, was a company town--a feudal estate belonging to Henry Ford. It took until 1940 for the United Automobile Workers Union to even win the legal right to have direct access to Ford workers. Finally, Ford used the policy of divide and conquer to try to split the workforce by nationality and/or race.

## **Black Workers at Ford**

During World War I, there was a big influx of black people moving into Detroit. Before 1935, less than 4 percent of the labor force in Detroit was black. With the exception of Ford, black workers were largely refused employment at the other major auto companies like General Motors and Chrysler.

The first black employee was hired at Ford in 1914. Ford employed over half of the black workers in auto prior to unionization. In 1940, on the eve of the strike, about 11 percent of the workforce at Ford was black.

The majority worked in the foundry and in janitorial jobs--the dirtiest, lowest paid, and most dangerous jobs in the plant. Some Black workers were hired in skilled jobs as well. Ford had a special division to hire black workers, headed by Don Marshall and by a former University of Michigan athlete, Willis Ward. Ward had a big influence in the section of Detroit called Paradise Valley, where many black auto-workers lived.

Ford set up direct links with black churches for recruitment, with both benefits and strings attached. Ford gave monetary contributions to the churches on the condition that they not use their churches for union activities. If they complied, their parishioners could get hired for \$5 a day --a very good wage for black workers at the time. Ministers who refused could lose their congregations to another church that had Ford connections.



*UAW organizer, Leon Bates, distributing newspapers outside Rouge factory, 1941*

When national black labor leader A. Philip Randolph came and spoke at a Detroit church in 1938, church members who worked at Ford were threatened with lay-offs and some were fired. By the end of the union drive only three black ministers stood with the union.

Ford also gave gifts to black organizations, and sent Marshall and Ward to give educational lectures in the black community. Ford took over Inkster, a rundown area where 500 Black workers and their families lived near the Rouge complex. Ford completely renovated the town. He had plumbing, electricity, and a sewage system put in and painted and remodeled the homes.

Ford as a consequence was praised as a great humanitarian. There was only one catch--the Inkster workers received only 12 cents an hour out of their normal wages and the rest went to repay Ford for his "good works".

The Ford Service also traded jobs for votes. Prior to 1939, Ford's Republican network in the Detroit Black community was said to control one-eighth of the votes cast in a normal Detroit city election.

## **Plant conditions and the union response**

Despite all of Ford's efforts, working conditions compelled workers towards the union. Ford workers earned 10 cents an hour less than workers at Chrysler and GM, 5 cents an hour under the average in the auto industry. They had no lunchrooms and only a 10-15 minute lunch break.

They worked rotating shifts with no premium pay. They had no overtime or special pay for Saturdays, Sundays, and holidays. There was widespread favoritism and foremen especially tried to pin black workers and white workers against each other. Ford's goon squad used fear and intimidation to keep people in line.

In March 1932, unemployed Ford workers marched on the plant and were fired on by Ford security. Four workers were killed. In 1937, union organizers who went to Gate 4 to distribute union literature were beaten up.

Meanwhile, internal problems in the United Auto Workers (UAW), which was affiliated with the newly formed Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), were also hampering the Ford union drive. Homer Martin, the president of the UAW, was secretly meeting with Ford management. He ended up on the Ford payroll, which really hurt the union's credibility.



*Striking workers confront a strikebreaker during the strike*

The biggest challenge to the union remained winning black workers to the union cause. This was no easy task. In 1937, the UAW accepted the idea of separate seniority lists by race.

In 1939, black workers tried to cross a picket line at Chrysler and there was a fight between white workers and black workers. Problems like this, added to Ford's policies, made Black workers skeptical of unionization.

The UAW did try actively to combat racism. When black workers faced discrimination at the UAW convention in St. Louis in 1939, the union voted not to hold its convention there again. The UAW collaborated with the NAACP in the 1930s on issues like anti-lynching laws. The union hired black organizers and utilized its own black members to try to organize in other plants.

As workers saw that black organizers were playing a real role in the Ford drive and that the UAW opposed discrimination, a shift gradually began to take place.

Since there was no legal access to the plant until 1940, a lot of house-to-house canvassing had to be done to get the word out to Ford workers. The workers were great innovators!

The dairy workers gave the UAW lists of Ford workers on their routes. Friends and wives would take the tourist's tour of the Ford plant and once inside put on UAW caps or hold up signs.

Workers on the assembly lines would set the car radios to the union station. Workers put union leaflets in cars on the line and in the toilet paper in the bathrooms. The union put on daily radio programs in several languages and put out a newspaper for workers called Ford Facts.

Sometimes, the NAACP co-sponsored events with the union and the pro-union ministers opened their churches for black workers to attend. Black workers, under black UAW organizer Walter Hardin and fired black workers from other plants, were active in the UAW campaign. They met every Saturday morning and advised the Ford UAW staff. The UAW presented an integrated team in the black community as a show of unity.

The union effort was countered by Don Marshall who gave a banquet in February for 300 black leaders. Marshall gave a speech charging that the CIO was run by the foreign born and denouncing the black ministers who worked with the union. He threw in anti-communism rhetoric as well.

But despite what Ford tried to do, slowly the union was being built in the plant. Bill McKie, a Communist Party organizer, suggested that each organizer gather 10 workers together. If in three weeks none were fired, they were to split up and organize 10 new members. This plan worked well.

The role of the Communist Party was yet another ingredient in the Ford unionization mix. By 1938 the CP had 2600 members in the Detroit area, of whom 750 were in auto. In 1941, they had ISO to 250 members in clubs at the Rouge complex. The editor of the UAW paper was associated with the CP and several leading black members of the organizing team were CP members.

## **Union growth skyrockets at Ford**

The union grew department by department and then building by building. There were over 1000 volunteer in-plant organizers. They held membership meetings. In response, Ford fired hundreds of workers.

Going into World War II, Ford held defense contracts amounting to \$55 million. The CIO threatened a campaign against the contracts, noting that Henry Ford had received the Grand Cross from Germany and was known as both pro-German and an anti Semite. The government made a token gesture of withholding one contract. But the gesture raised the workers' morale.

There was also government action in the courts and through the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), resulting in massive leafleting at the Ford complex for the first time. Workers began to wear union buttons in the plant, elected shop stewards, and forced the company to bargain. There began to be a real but unofficial union in the Ford Rouge.

In February and March 1941, union growth skyrocketed. In one week, 6000 workers were signed up. Tension was building. The UAW demanded an official discussion with the company. It received no reply. The union filed an intent to strike with the NLRB.

On March 13, 3000 workers sat down to protest the latest firings of union members. On March 18, 6000 sat down until the company agreed to rehire 12 fired unionists. On March 19, another building struck, and the company gave in.

On April 1, Ford refused to meet with a union committee in the rolling mill and fired several union workers. The rolling mill workers stopped production, and the strike spread around the plant. Ford called the Dearborn police and the VAW leadership and asked them to send the workers back to work. The

VAW proposed that Ford rehire the fired workers. The company refused. Two hours later the union declared the strike official.

Ford's Security and 1000 workers stayed in the plant as strikebreakers. They were paid \$1 an hour, 24 hours a day. Most were black--either longtime workers loyal to Ford or new workers brought in for the purpose of breaking the strike.

But the picket lines showed black and white solidarity. Tens of thousands of workers joined the picket lines at all the gates. There were daily strike bulletins, hourly press statements and 12 radio broadcasts a day. Ten sound trucks got the message out.

The workers parked their cars in huge barricades, blocking all entrances to the plant. The UAW held a rally attended by 16,000-20,000. Promises of support poured in from workers at Chrysler and GM, and from all over the CIO.

### **A racial conflict?**

On April 2 there was a battle at Gate 4. Some black workers charged out of the plant and attacked the primarily white picket line. There were smaller skirmishes and dozens were injured. Huge pictures were printed in all the Detroit papers giving the impression that race was the crucial issue in the strike.



*U.A.W. organizer beaten up by Ford's hired thugs.*

Ford said it was a racial conflict and tried to mobilize the black community against the UAW. He also used the AFL, the competitor with the UAW. The AFL had announced in February that they had a majority of workers at Ford and now they attacked the strike. Homer Martin, who posed as the AFL Ford leader, charged that the UAW was communist controlled.

The union pickets were also trying to encourage black workers who had stayed inside to come out. They shared their donuts and coffee immediately with anyone who left the plant. Sometimes they signed them up for the union on the spot.

On Sunday, April 6, there was minor fighting again. The union said that 153 workers had required hospitalization since the start of the strike and that six were in serious condition.

The black ministers who supported the union went to the plant to make an appeal to the black workers inside and to rally support for the strike. The NAACP youth rallied to the cause-distributing literature in churches, stores, and households and at the plant. The head of the NAACP joined them. In all, 10,000 leaflets were distributed.

Walter White, head of the national NAACP, came to town and proposed that the UAW place newspaper ads pledging equal treatment for black workers. The UAW also put out a special edition of its newspaper, Ford Facts, stating its commitment to black workers. White went with the NAACP sound truck and appealed to black workers to come out of the plant. One did emerge. Soon other black community groups joined in.



*Workers rally during the strike*

The government gave Ford a temporary restraining order on April 2 to prevent strikers from keeping workers out of the plant. However, it failed because the workers had been clever enough to set up their car barricades already. The government mobilized mediators to intervene at the local, state, and federal levels, including the governor of Michigan, Van Wagoner. After one week of the strike, the NLRB ruled that there must be a collective bargaining election within 45 days, a departure from the usual 60 days. But the question remained about reinstating the eight workers whose firings had kicked off the strike. The governor and Murray, head of the CIA, proposed to reinstate five of them and arbitrate the cases of the other three later. Ford agreed that there would be no reprisals against strikers.

There was a mass meeting of 20,000 to vote on a settlement. Some opposition arose from those who felt the contract should be won before settling. But the VAW agreed to postpone other complaints until after the union election. The strike was ended and workers went back to work on April 14.

The rival AFL continued to foment racial antagonisms. One week after the settlement there was some new fighting in the plant. UAW sound trucks circled the plant asking workers not to be provoked and calling for class solidarity.

There were rumors circulating that the CIA was going to get rid of the black workers in the foundry who had stayed in the plant, so they came to work armed to fight. State troopers were assigned to the plant.

The UAW had a mass meeting to rally support. Sixty thousand workers and their families crowded into Cadillac Square in Detroit. On May 21, the election was held on union representation. The UAW won overwhelmingly while the AFL got 28 percent of the vote.

On June 20, the contract was signed. It provided for the first time dues check-off, seniority, and a grievance procedure. It raised wages to correspond to the rest of the auto industry. There was also a clause prohibiting discrimination.

For the first time, the UAW won a union shop. This also represented the kind of maneuver that Ford was capable of. He had done all he could to keep the union out, but now that it was in, he wanted all the workers under the control of the union apparatus!



*Aftermath of a battle with Ford during the strike*

A ratification meeting was held at the state fairgrounds. Twelve thousand workers voted five to one to accept the contract, though one grouping in the union opposed the contract because the ratio of stewards to workers was only one to 550. This was a serious blow to the in-plant organization used by the workers to build up the union.

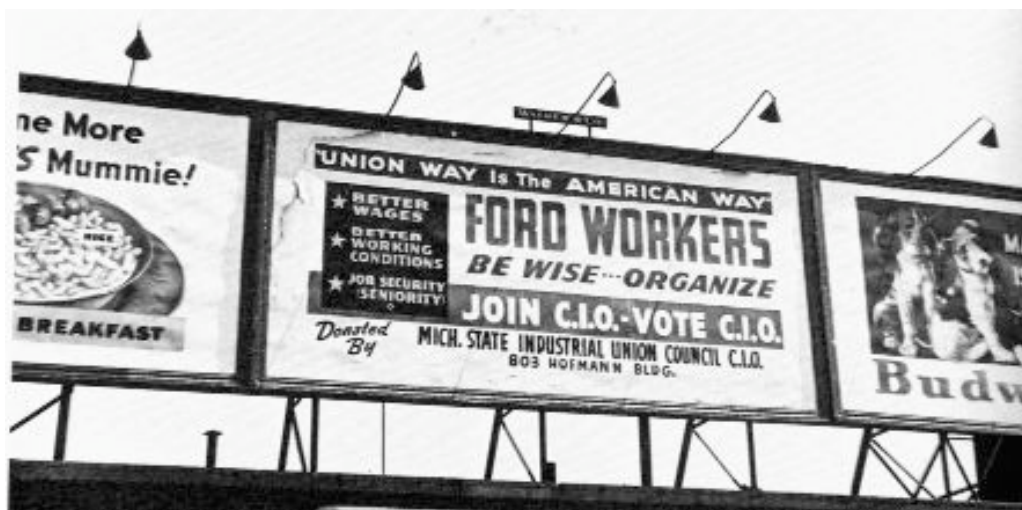
The local Ford union set up a committee charged with dealing with race. They put out educational literature and took a clear stand opposing racism. In Ford Facts, they showed black workers that the UAW had black committeemen and stewards, and members of the negotiating committee. They had integrated baseball teams (long before the major leagues!)

Ford stopped hiring black workers as soon as the union was in. Obviously he could no longer manipulate racial antagonisms to keep the workers divided. Out of 22,000 workers hired in 1942, less than 100 were black. Unfortunately, the UAW did little to challenge Ford's policy.

A new conflict arose over The Sojourner Truth housing project. This federally funded project had been planned for low-income blacks but at the last minute was switched to whites. There were big protests and finally the federal government was forced to go back to its original plans.

When blacks tried to move in, they were greeted with white pickets. There was a small riot and the police brutally attacked the blacks. The UAW and the NAACP both opposed what was going on. Finally on April 29, the black tenants succeeded in moving in.

In 1943, there were riots in Detroit in which many blacks were victimized by white mobs. Despite this, there was less friction in the plants organized by the UAW than elsewhere. Black workers and white workers defended each other against racial attacks.



*Advertising the unionization drive in Ford*

By the mid-1940s, the VAW had gone through major changes. Radicals had been forced out of the leadership. The VAW also pulled back from its commitment to its black membership and most black officers and staff had disappeared from the payrolls. But the changes that had been made in the relationships in the plant remained.

The struggles at Ford River Rouge in 1941 showed the power of the workers to overcome many obstacles in their path. They were helped in their struggles by militants of the left, members of the NAACP, and other black community leaders and youth. The way the Ford workers built their union in the plant from the ground up shows the possibilities of ordinary workers to create their own organizations to defend their interests.

The struggles at Ford show that workers can challenge the system of oppression they face on the job every day. The fact that workers at Ford could have integrated picnics and baseball games as well as stand shoulder to shoulder in the plant and in their neighborhoods shows the power of class solidarity to overcome the worst attempts at racial division.

Today workers face similar obstacles and divisions. And the same possibilities exist for the workers to triumph. It remains for the U.S. working class to understand this and use its power